

— So What Happened to Wyrð? —

So what happened to Wyrð? Religious suppression. Early Christianity, as an evangelical religion with political power behind it from Rome, drove Wyrð underground. The sacred traditions of the indigenous peoples who were our ancestors were lost as surely as are those of the disappearing tribes around the world today. It seems to have been yet another example of our age-old curse: the human inability to come to terms with sacred realms free of political tyranny. The way of Wyrð disappeared beneath the waves of 'progress', slipping ever deeper into the obscurity our historians denigrated as the Dark Ages.

But a thousand years and more have passed. While today, sadly, in some regions of the Earth there are wars still being fought on religious grounds, on the whole Christianity is no longer such an evangelising, missionary movement. In an age of ecumenical sympathies, coexistence of spiritual paths is once more becoming possible. We are also now much more aware than we used to be of the fact that we live, and need to coexist, in a multi-faith world.

In considering here the wisdom of our ancestors, I do not present it as an exclusive path. I take the view that there are many paths to God. But I believe that in that multi-faith world, it is imperative that the ancient wisdom of the Wyrð reasserts its rightful position alongside the other great spiritual traditions. This book is about how we can rekindle Wyrð wisdom in the intimacy of our own lives, and allow its light to illuminate our personal search for knowledge and the sacred.

CHAPTER ONE

How Our Ancestors Lived

— The Forest People —

From an aeroplane on a clear day, the lush green landscape of England looks like a patchwork of farm fields, with scattered settlements connected with ribbon roads, and punctuated by great towns and cities. But two thousand years ago, if we could have made the same airborne survey, the land would have appeared radically different. At this time, before the centuries of forest clearing for agriculture and building, great woodlands covered the island, broken only by tracts of open heath and moorland and hilltops ridged with scrub cover.¹ Scattered within this forest landscape, a few hundred thousand of our 'native' ancestors lived in small tribal societies. The same scene was repeated all over western and northern Europe.

The shadows of the old world still fall across today's landscape, for many of the names of these early forests survive. In the middle of Britain, for example, forests called Dean, Morfe and Kinver each covered scores of square miles, and dense stands of oak and ash formed the forest called Sherwood, later famed as the hiding place of the legendary outlaw Robin Hood. Hornbeam, thorn, oak and ash covered much of south-east Britain, where the great forest of Andred was described by an annalist writing in the year 892 as '30 miles wide and stretching 120 miles from east to west'. On the small island of Britain, forests of this extent dominated the landscape.

Small groups of hunter-gathering people had inhabited the island for thousands of years, but the population had begun to increase during the last few centuries BC when tribal groups, subsumed for convenience now under the umbrella title of 'Celtic peoples', came across to Britain from the European mainland. They formed a rich and

thriving culture. Later they were colonised by Rome, and became the wild outer fringe of that great empire. The Romans built roads, manor houses and towns, and the ruling aristocracy was modelled on Roman lines, but many of the Celtic peoples continued to live in the ways of old, in tribal groups with local chieftains.

In the mid-400s AD, the Romans withdrew their occupying military forces and their administrative aristocracy because Rome itself was coming under attack from other kingdoms, and needed to retrench. With the Roman military gone, many more tribal groups from the north-west European mainland rowed and sailed across the Channel to raid, invade and settle.

They came mainly from the area of what is now Denmark, northern Germany and Holland, people from the tribes known as the Angles (after whom the country of England was eventually named: Angle-Land), Saxons, Jutes, and Friesians, among others. One of the earliest sources records for 514 that 'In this year the West Saxons came into Britain with three ships.'² These and many similar entries reveal the repeated spectacle of a few score men at a time rowing across the choppy, grey waves of the English Channel in their low boats, stiling their oars in sheltered coves, and scrambling ashore on to deserted beaches. Their boats, constructed from planks joined by rivets, were narrow and easy to handle, and on occasion they were able to sneak along the rivers past Celtic settlements deep into the countryside, before docking inland and carrying the boats to protected sites.

Each boatload, or small flotilla of boats, formed their own little settlement, and created territories in which members were linked by tribal loyalties and blood ties, and which were ruled over by local chieftains. They formed defensible stockades, often surrounded by a deep pit to make the walls more difficult to scale, then sent for their extended families in subsequent boat journeys.

It used to be thought that the Celts were all driven out to the west, or enslaved, by the new invaders from the continent, but now historians realise that there were all manner of accommodations between the various tribes. In some cases the newer arrivals and existing Celtic settlements traded, cooperated, lived together and intermarried; on other occasions skirmishes and raiding persisted, and some of the

Celtic tribes moved west and south to live in what is now Wales and the county of Cornwall.

If we could row up the rivers or trek through the countryside of that time we would pass through the territories of tribes whose names survive even today, immortalised in the local place names. In the seventh century an area of one of the large forests was called *linderauuda*, meaning 'in the wood of the Deirans', and today Wychwood in north-west Oxfordshire is the modern name of Hwicce Wood, the forest home of the Hwicce tribe. In the west of England low-lying ground was covered with water for much of the year, with a few islands of higher ground offering sites for early settlement; rowing to Glastingii, the oldest name for the town of Glastonbury, would bring us to the island of the Glast tribe.

— Tribal Villages —

Approaching the villages, we would see first the grey firesmoke drifting in the wind above the trees; fires were needed all year round for cooking and blacksmithing, and in the winter for heating. Built in areas cleared of trees, most settlements had at their centre a large timber hall surrounded by a stockade for defence, with smaller houses and huts spilling neatly around the perimeter of the stockade wall.

Around and amongst the houses the sights and sounds would include tethered goats and clucking chickens; perhaps the shrill cries of an ox-herd taking oxen to plough the nearby fields. The land was broken up for sowing seeds with ploughs pulled by oxen. Few peasants owned more than a couple of oxen, and so where large ploughs were available, they shared animals to form a full team of eight oxen to pull it. More distant sounds would include the forge hammers ringing on metal in the blacksmith's hut, placed, for symbolic reasons, as we shall see later, on the edge of the settlement.

The houses were framed in wood, with walls often formed of long, pliable sticks called wattles. They were woven together and then daubed with mud to keep out draughts. Others would look larger, like 'A-frames' with plank floors and an excavated pit under the floor for a cool food store. Some of the outer walls were covered with turf,

which provided insulation and weather protection, and the roofs thatched. In the summer months these small buildings were humming with activity, for most of them were used as summer workshops, and in the larger ones people slept, with clay hearths in the centre of the floor holding a wood fire.

The interior of such a one-room house was cool and dark, save for chinks of light filtering through the smoke hole in the roof and gaps around the door. Down either side of the room, against the two longest walls, ran raised benches topped with linen-covered mattresses stuffed with straw or horse hair, and the centre of the room was taken up by a raised fire-pit, raked clean and laid with fresh kindling. The planked floor was strewn with dried rushes and aromatic, creamy-flowered meadowsweet. Clothes and domestic implements hung from pegs driven into the beams of the wooden frame.

— Halls of the Chieftains —

The main hall or longhouse was sometimes an impressive building, constructed for the local chieftain and elite warriors, but often also inhabited by many of the peasants in the winter. An example of these longhouses is the farmhouse-like wooden structure excavated in the manor of Cheddar in Somerset, almost eighty feet long and twenty feet wide in the middle, and dating from the eighth or ninth century. Even earlier, in the seventh century, a massive timber hall was built at Yeavinger in Northumbria, with lesser halls set about it, probably dwellings for the kings' companions-in-arms. One structure of a more primitive type may have housed servants. There was also a grandstand for open-air assemblies. In later years, the excavations show, the grandstand was enlarged, additional small dwellings were built, and a hall of more ambitious design took the place of the original great hall.³

— Food and Drink —

Around the edges of the settlements, in fields cleared of timber which had been used for building and firewood, stretched farmland, crop fields divided into strips by grassy baulks and bounded by headland

bumpy from turning ploughs. By the fifth and sixth centuries AD the tribal farmers had an effective and organised system of land management.

Land was shared among the people who had cleared it for agriculture, and the fields were laid out in strips, each strip fenced and farmed by one extended family. They were expected to take full responsibility for it, and to respect their neighbour's patch. In the late seventh century King Ine declared that: 'If free peasants have a common meadow or other land divided into shares to fence, and some have fenced their portion and some have not, and if cattle eat up their common crops or grass, those who are responsible for the gap are to go and pay to the others, who have fenced their part, compensation for the damage that has been done there.'⁴

Each year, in rotation, some of the arable land was left to lie fallow from crop production to replenish its energies and become fully fertile again. Such practices were developed through close observation, through feeling the power of the land, through intimate experience of its moods and capacities.

Along with oats, rye and wheat, barley was the main crop, ground into meal for bread-making or converted into malt for brewing. Beer and alcoholic apple cider were the usual drink, with mead, made from honey, a more expensive drink for the aristocracy.

Baking and cooking were carried on much as they were on the American frontier a century ago. The Anglo-Saxons knew and used yeast and so the opportunities for varied means of preparation were considerably enhanced. Fruit and vegetables, generally smaller and perhaps less sweet than those of today, included cabbage, onions, leeks and turnips, plus lettuce, peas, and parsley. Apples (which could be stored through the winter) and berries were the main fruits, being available in wild and domestic varieties. Cherries, pears, plums and nuts were available too.

The villagers kept cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry, but fresh domestic meat was an occasional luxury for the peasant. Pigs were popular and practical because they could root a living out of the woods and because their meat lent itself to smoking or salting for winter use. Sheep were raised for wool.

There were also chicken, geese, mutton, rabbit, deer, eggs, eels, fish and shoreline shellfish, cheese, other dairy products and, on occasion, game. Salt was a necessity for meat preservation, and was obtained mostly from sea water by means of salt pans. Garlic was considered to be more a vegetable, eaten for its bulk, than a spice, although there was extensive use of herbs. The people did without sugar, which was introduced into Europe by Norman Crusaders returning from the East. Honey was produced in bulk and highly prized.

So this, in practical terms, is how they lived. I have focused on England to provide a specific context for the study of Wyrd, but this was the primary pattern of tribal settlements extending right across Europe, the basis for essentially the same way of living, similar beliefs and practices, common insights and knowledge.

— Living in Nature —

Of course, like surviving indigenous peoples today, the everyday environment of our ancestors was comprehensively different from ours in form, structure, sight, sounds, smells, tastes. To our senses it would feel alien. They lived not what we call 'close to nature' but actually involved in nature: they had to be on intimate terms with nature in order to survive.⁵

It sounds idyllic in some ways, but it was not, of course, a utopian environment. As with all traditional societies where agriculture is subsistence, life was extremely dependent upon the cycles of crop success or failure. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a history of England compiled in the ninth century from earlier sources, contains repeated references to great famines and epidemics of disease, and the monk Bede records that in 664 'a sudden pestilence depopulated the southern coast of Britain and afterwards extending into the province of Northumbria, ravaged the country far and near, and destroyed a great multitude of men.'⁶

The indigenous Europeans had to respect the imperatives of the forces of nature. Such an intimate interweaving of fates, in which the state of the environment had such a direct impact on human well-

being, meant the tribespeople observed, attuned to and grew to know their landscape in all its nuances, intimacies and moods. From this necessarily acute and deep awareness of the living connection between humans and the environment our ancestors created many of the cosmologies, myths, wisdom stories and shamanic practices of Wyrd.

— Lessons for the Concrete Jungle —

But what has this to do with us today? Most of us in the Western world live in urban or suburban environments, and even those who live rurally usually do so with the support of modern technology: our houses and transportation shield us from the rigours of the environment. And even if we wanted to, it would be impossible to redistribute ourselves wholesale out of the cities and back into the countryside.

The issues that face us are far more subtle and complex than a simple romanticising of the charms of nature, although we all know that as a species we are at crisis point in our balance with the wild environment. But the answers to this need to be sought within our inner worlds as much as in the external world. What I believe we can learn from the wisdom of Wyrd is the *essence* of the deeper aspects of the relationship between people and nature which our forebears experienced. It is in these deeper aspects that the implications of their world view, developed in their environment of forests and glades, has relevance for our lives in the concrete jungles of our cities.

Let us therefore enter as fully as we can into their cosmology, their understanding of life and death, Earth and sky.